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Author(s): Marilyn Hunt, Ann Barnes and Jo Redford

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MFL homework in year 9 French: rising to the challenge

Ann Barnes, Marilyn Hunt, Jo Redford

Abstract

The objectives of this article are, first, to describe a collaborative project between teacher educators and a foreign languages (FL) department in a specialist language college and, second, to evaluate its success. The project focuses on Year 9 pupils across the ability range (in four groups) and involves staff in both institutions working together to plan and produce stimulating homework tasks in French, integrated into the spring term scheme of work. Pupils' work and progress were evaluated and their views sought as well as those of participating staff. A classroom-based action research approach was adopted for the project. The article concludes with outcomes, which include recommendations and ideas to increase the effectiveness of FL homework.

Background and context of the project

This homework project is the result of collaboration between teacher educators at a higher education institution (HEI) and a foreign languages (FL) department in a specialist language college. The language college is an all-girls 11-18 comprehensive which takes students from across the whole city. The school has a clear homework policy with the aim of extending learning beyond school. The school's languages department handbook includes extensive advice on homework, indicating, for example, a range of tasks integral to the scheme of work to achieve a balance in the type of homework set, the need to take account of the level of the class and the ability of the individual in order to set realistic homework, the homework timetable for each key stage, follow-up to homework and means of praising/chasing up homework. While homework is not considered to be a problem, the department is constantly looking to innovate and improve practice and this topic was considered to be an area which could prove to be a positive focus. It also fitted in with the whole-school context where departments were looking at more 'extended' cross-curricular projects. There was scope for an international dimension and for departmental collaboration.

Sharp, Keys and Benefield (2001) in their review of research on homework published between 1988 and 2001 reported a disappointing lack of reliable evidence on 'what works' in terms of homework assignments, procedures, marking and feedback. The aims of the current project were to explore pupils' attitudes to homework, specifically their French homework, as well as staff perceptions, and to investigate the whole process of planning, setting, completion and evaluation as well as the end-product, in order to gain greater insight into French homework in Year 9 (age 14) and how it might be improved. The project provided an opportunity to work collaboratively as a French department and with an HEI to find some possible ways forward and therefore to provide a contribution to the as yet sparse evidence base.

Literature on homework

Homework has been the subject of debate for some time. It tends to be viewed positively by most involved with education, including parents. Indeed, many teachers, researchers and commentators regard homework as an essential component of school education. Cowan and Hallam (1999) outline the perceived purposes and advantages of homework: it can promote academic learning and generic skills, can be beneficial to schools and can promote home-school liaison and family communication. The reasons for giving homework are extensive. For example, Buckland and Short (1993) claim that FL homework:

- gives control
- can develop confidence
- can promote creativity
- can support differentiation by task
- can support differentiation by outcome
- can encourage pupil independence
- can support communication between school and parents
- can provide pragmatic ways of lightening the burden of assessment.

However, a significant minority view homework as unnecessary and potentially disadvantageous to schools; it can affect families negatively and can be detrimental to pupils (Cowan and Hallam 1999).

Non-statutory homework guidelines were published by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (1998) and by September 1999 all schools in England were obliged to have a home-school agreement on homework. This agreement is not legally binding but is thought of as a declaration of intent on the part of the school, the parent and the child. The government certainly believes that homework is important in improving attainment. The Department for Education and Science (DfES) - now Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) - standards site (<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/homework/>) declares: 'Well organised homework can play a vital role in raising standards of achievement'. Sweetman (1998) described the situation thus:

Government figures prove that those schools which set more homework in a systematic way achieve better test and examination results and are given more favourable reports from Ofsted. The Government is also concerned about the quantity of television watched and the numbers of children unsupervised, or out late, on the streets. Setting more homework, it believes, is a good way to raise standards and tackle social ills simultaneously.

However, studies of the effectiveness of homework in promoting achievement have often reached contradictory conclusions. An extensive meta-analysis of research on the effects of homework, evaluating almost 120 published studies from the USA, concluded that time spent on homework positively influenced pupil achievement at secondary level, especially so for older pupils (Cooper 1989). In an analysis of responses from over 700 pupils (plus parents and teachers), Cooper et al. (1998) discovered a weak positive relationship between the amount of homework assigned and student achievement. In the UK, Tymms and Fitz-Gibbon (1992) also found a comparatively weak positive link between the time 3000 secondary school pupils claimed they spent on homework and their subsequent A-level results (pupils who spent at least seven hours per week on homework gained about one third of a grade higher than pupils of the same ability and gender who spent only two hours per week on homework).

Other studies, however, have found no or only very slight improvements associated with homework. For example, research using a database of English primary schools reported almost no correlation between Year 6 pupils' ability (measured using cognitive reasoning tests) and their frequency of attempting homework (Farrow, Tymms and Henderson 1999). Studies in the USA, which benefited from very large sample sizes and refined statistical analyses, demonstrated a weak correlation between homework time and achievement, yet after controlling for motivation, ability and other variables, no meaningful effect of homework on achievement was apparent (Cool and Keith 1991; Keith and Cool 1992). Of course, this lack of effect could be dependent on how effectively homework is set and assessed. Walberg and Paik (2000), in a UNESCO booklet on effective educational practices drawn from a large range of reviews of practice, claim that students learn more when they complete homework that is graded, commented upon and discussed by their teachers.

Warton (2001) argues that the Eccles's expectancy-value model of motivation (Eccles 1983) suggests that achievement-related behaviour such as choice of activity and task persistence are most directly influenced by the students' expectations of success or failure and by the subjective value given to the task. According to Eccles's (1983) model, the students' goals as well as the value, meaning, and significance they attach to the homework activities are critical for the choices the students make, the effort they will contribute to the endeavour and to the persistence they will display.

One particular point of interest in our project was pupils' attitudes to homework. Sharp, Keys and Benefield (2001) conducted a review of research on homework published between 1988 and 2001, covering 101 studies, 40% of which are US-based, 37% carried out in the UK and the rest conducted in Australia, Canada, Israel and the Netherlands. The review revealed that there is a limited body of research on pupils' attitudes to homework but that, on the whole, pupils have positive attitudes to homework and feel it is important in helping them to do well at school. Positive attitudes to homework are associated with positive attitudes to school. They also noted that the limited research into pupils' preferences indicates that pupils dislike being set routine homework tasks (such as finishing off class work) which do not contribute to their learning. They prefer interesting, challenging and varied tasks that are clearly defined and have adequate deadlines (Sharp, Keys and Benefield 2001). For example, pupils in two American secondary schools resented homework that was tedious or boring (Black 1990), and Year 8 children from three English schools claimed to dislike tasks that did not consolidate class work or contribute to further learning (Harris and Rudduck 1994). MacBeath and Turner's (1990) study, which sought the views and experiences of teachers, pupils and parents from 13 Scottish primary and secondary schools, showed that homework was perceived as useful by pupils when it was an integral part of school work and that homework was enjoyable and considered of value if it was well-explained, interesting or varied, set with adequate deadlines and at an appropriate ability level. A more recent study (Xu and Yuan 2003) revealed that many students complained that assignments were frequently too boring, too easy or too hard, or not relevant to their lives.

In spite of the reporting of pupils' preferences as above, a trawl of the literature reveals that there is an absence of research focusing on project homework in the way that the present project does. There are, however, reports of school practice using long-lasting FL tasks, where Key Stage 3 pupils have a choice from a menu of extended homework activities of which they have to complete one each term (Caddy 2004). Pupils are expected to work on the task over time when homework may be difficult to set or when staff are absent.

A small number of studies have investigated gender differences in homework attitudes. An early study found that boys spent less time on homework than girls (Chen and Stevenson 1989). Cowan and Hallam (1999) also reported that girls tend to spend longer on homework and view it more positively. Jones (2006), in his research on how to boost boys' performance in FL, found that boys like to choose what they do, when they do it, who the audience will be, what they read/listen to/speak or write about, as well as to choose content and the medium in which they do it, for example, e-mail, fax, PowerPoint, mobile phone. According to Jones' research, boys like to be in charge, to have responsibility and they need to know why they are doing things.

The development of the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the FL classroom and the availability of the Internet has developed the potential to widen the range of homework tasks. The Chalkface Project *ICT and Modern Foreign Languages* booklet (<http://www.chalkface.com/products/Languages/AIMF/>) lists the following as benefits of the Internet in relation to homework:

- improved motivation
- development of independent learning and research skills
- stimulation and engagement of the learner
- structured, guided learning opportunities
- email, discussion groups and message boards afford learners communication opportunities
- online lessons develop network literacy: accessing resources, creating resources and communicating with others are complex extensions of the four Attainment Targets
- social development: learners are able to 'visit' places and take part in activities and events that would otherwise be too costly or too far away for them.

The above publication suggests the use of Web-based homework slips which name the website to be visited and state the precise title of the material to be accessed on the site. There is also space on the slip for the teacher's email address to enable work to be emailed direct to the teacher. The teacher can see at a glance from his/her inbox who is doing homework and books do not have to be collected in, saving valuable lesson time. However, some research, for example Warton (2001), reports the risk of pupils' homework assignments being augmented, if not fully replaced, by the great proliferation of pre-packaged Web-based materials at the beginning of the twenty-first century and the temptation for students to complete a disliked task in the easiest possible manner. In the research conducted by Cranmer (2006), the practice of copying and pasting both text and image into projects was found to be common.

Methodology

A classroom-based action research approach was adopted for this project. The potential of action research as a process which teachers might use in schools to improve their own practice was highlighted over 50 years ago by Corey (1953, 7): 'Action Research is the process by which practitioners attempt to study their problems scientifically in order to guide, correct, and evaluate their decisions and actions'. Action research is thus a systematic inquiry into one's own practice, carried out by teachers in their own professional context and aimed at improving their own teaching and their students' learning; it therefore ensures its relevance to the professionals and

can also boost their confidence and morale. Many teachers regard theory as '...threatening because it is produced by a group of outsiders who claim to be experts at generating valid knowledge about educational practices' (Elliott 1991, 45). In the case reported here teachers wanted to conduct their own research into an aspect of their practice in order to improve it. 'Action research is characterized as research that is done by teachers for themselves' (Mertler 2005, 2). Action research typically involves collaboration between colleagues. The teachers' ownership of the research and their involvement in the process can be regarded as one of the strongest points of action research.

Action research is an iterative activity, which might follow a cycle thus: awareness of new problem, analysis of the problem, generation of solutions to the problem, select best solutions, implement solutions, evaluate solutions. Given its emphasis on problem-solving, action research may risk being regarded as a 'deficit model' of professional development (Koshy 2005, 31). In this project the 'problem' identified was homework in Year 9 French, although the FL staff were keen to point out that this was not a deficit: in reality homework was not considered a problem but a potential focus for improvement. The reconnaissance of the problem involved reading current literature and colleagues discussing it and completing questionnaires to establish teachers' perceptions of homework and pupils' baseline attitudes to homework. The questionnaires comprised a series of mainly open questions eliciting a range of responses, which were then recorded, collated and categorised into themes according to the content of the responses. Once the analysis was complete, the team discussed possible solutions, and a programme of teaching and homework was planned for a six-week period. Subsequently the teachers evaluated the project, and pupils gave their views in questionnaires and group interviews on video.

The project

Planning and implementation meetings between the teacher educators and the language college FL teachers were held throughout the project. There were four teachers and one graduate teacher programme (GTP) trainee (a teacher carrying out their initial teacher training on a GTP, where the training is primarily conducted in one school as an employee) in charge of four Year 9 classes.

At the start of the project, baseline attitudes and information were collected by means of a staff questionnaire which sought to determine staff perceptions of homework: whether they thought French homework was important and why/why not; which type of French homework tasks they set; and what they perceived as the problems with homework in Year 9. Teachers' responses were overwhelmingly positive about the importance of homework, for a number of sound pedagogical reasons, including consolidation, diagnostic and formative assessment, practice of wider (study/life) skills, individualised opportunities and FL practice. Teachers were already setting a wide range of homework tasks, which were categorised into a number of types: learning of vocabulary or grammar rules; writing (a range of tasks); reading; speaking; grammar practice; ICT; creativity; research/projects; collaborative; translation and dictionary work. Teachers mentioned a range of problems, which again were categorised into a number of types: motivation ('lack of effort in some cases (i.e. doing the bare minimum)'), absence, non-completion ('getting homework completed on time by all pupils in the class') and differentiation/support ('with a weaker group, ensuring they can actually do it and remember to do it').

In the same way, baseline attitudes of pupils to homework were collected by means of a questionnaire to all girls involved and the results were compared with the same questionnaire administered to two classes in the neighbouring boys' school (see Appendix 1). As explained above, themes and categories were established from the responses to the mainly open questions. Key issues from the initial data revealed that the type of homework tasks most preferred by the girls from all subjects were drawing/design/creative (53%), research and collecting information (24%), using ICT (20%) and projects (14%). In contrast, the boys preferred no homework (20%), projects (14%), revising, learning, preparing for tests (14%) and drawing/design/creative (10%). Many other homework task types were mentioned but those listed here were the ones mentioned by most pupils in each case. The girls preferred these types of homework because they were fun/enjoyable (39%), easy/not too hard (24%) and interesting/less boring (14%); and the boys preferred them because they were easy/not too hard (30%), fun/enjoyable (20%) and 'I don't like any tasks' (20%). As far as French homework tasks were concerned, the girls preferred posters/drawing (33%), researching/collecting information or pictures (29%), writing to a pen-pal (17%) and using ICT (14%). Again, the boys' results were in sharp contrast to the girls'. Twenty-eight percent said they didn't like any French homework and 30% said they preferred revising/learning vocabulary, 12% liked worksheets and 10% writing something specific. The girls liked these tasks because they were fun/enjoyable (36%), easy/less difficult (24%) and because they could 'learn something/better' (14%). The boys liked these tasks because they were easy/less difficult (32%), they don't like any French homework (24%), can learn something better (10%) and it's quick (8%). Girls' and boys' judgements about the *importance* of French homework, however, were strikingly similar. Both girls (51%) and boys (50%) considered French homework to be important, with 27% of girls and 26% of boys mentioning its importance for consolidation, practice and review and because of a future need to speak French and travel (girls, 13%, boys 8%). However, 10% of girls and 6% of boys did not know if French homework was important and 36% girls and 42% boys did not feel it was important. The reasons girls gave for this were that they did not want to speak French in the future (17%) and they considered it boring (8%). Boys said they did not want to speak French in the future (10%), they did enough work in class (10%) and they would not choose it as an option (10%).

One particular open question included in the questionnaire led to a wide variety of responses: 'If you had to set your own French homework what tasks would you ideally set yourself?' A selection of their responses reflects their viewpoints:

Boys:

- 'Sit back and play on computer'
- 'Making wordsearches and crosswords to do with what lesson we have just had e.g. places in French'
- 'Level 5 piece of work but easily carried out'
- 'To study a French football match'
- 'Hard one so it pushes me further'
- 'Learning/testing self'
- 'Learn vocabulary'.

Girls:

- 'Writing to people in France and research from France and doing points on the information we find out'
- 'A booklet for a younger year at the end of a half term (over two weeks)'

- 'Do something creative to relate to the work we have been doing, like a poster or fact file etc'
- 'Research all about France or revise my work I've done in class and help myself to understand it more'
- 'Project so you can add lots of drawings and make it look interesting'
- 'I would set some research because you can just go on the Internet and go on goggle [sic] and jot things down in the back of your book or in a note book or something'.

Overall it was clear from the girls' comments that they liked a sense of ownership and purpose and that they appreciated tasks that helped consolidate their learning.

Once the results from the questionnaire were analysed, the teacher educators and the FL teachers met to discuss and evaluate the results and then to plan the project based on the data from the questionnaires (staff and pupils), the literature review and the discussion at planning meetings. It was decided that each member of staff would have similar aims to comply with the Year 9 scheme of work but that they would personalise the project by having different products (ICT-based, using existing pen-friend links, some using links in France). The topic chosen was the environment and the plan was to spend a six-week period working on this topic to compare and contrast their own town with towns where partner schools were based (Nottingham, Orange, Provence) and to produce an end 'product'.

Setting the homework

The team members felt that it was important to scrutinise the whole process carefully. *Setting* the homework was considered to be an important element, and one researcher observed and videoed all four teachers setting up the homework project. The results of these observations inform this section.

Introduction of the project

Three of the four teachers explained the homework project in English; one introduced the homework and time limit in French and then continued in English. Three of the teachers linked the introduction of the project to the questionnaire pupils had completed some weeks before, in one case eliciting from pupils what the questionnaire was about. The three teachers explained that teachers from their school and lecturers from the local university had looked carefully at the results of the questionnaire and had devised a special project incorporating pupils' views about how they liked to work to make homework more interesting and more exciting. At the end of the project pupils would have to fill in a further questionnaire about how it had gone.

The project

Each teacher outlined the nature of the project personalised for their own class:

- a six-week project to make a booklet/leaflet comparing Nottingham and their home town to send to an existing pen-pal link with Nottingham

- a brochure on their home town in French to send to a pen-friend they had met from Orange
- a more creative six-week project using ICT to describe their home town and to send the results to pen-friends in Orange
- an interactive display, for example, a jigsaw puzzle, a wheel that spins on a pointer, a poster, with a common theme: their home town, how it can be improved, perhaps comparing it with another town in Provence.

The homework research

The first homework task, to be completed over the half-term holiday, included research (a feature of homework which pupils viewed positively in the questionnaires). Teachers suggested ways to research their home town or elicited ideas from the pupils about how they could find out information, for example, using the Internet, books, school library, local library, leaflets at the tourist information office and asking pen-pals. In one class the teacher checked the understanding of 'relevant' and 'specific'; and in this class and another, the teachers emphasised the need to collect information and personalise it, not just copy and paste. In one class pupils were given a clear list of what facts to find out about their home town and Orange, e.g. population, temperature and rainfall in March, five places of interest for tourists, any other five pieces of information. In another, pupils were asked to find out about places of interest in their home town and activities/things to do in their home town and region, and for Provence they were advised to do a Google search.

Timing

The project was to start the week before half-term, with research over half-term and follow-up class and homework over the following 4-5 weeks.

Comparison with usual homework

In one class pupils were asked to describe their usual homework: finishing off class work, worksheets, completing pen-pal letters, revision or prompt cards to be done for the following day or within a few days. This contrasted with the project, which was more open with a longer period of time to complete.

Final outcome: the product

- The teacher described how the booklet/leaflet was to be assessed: on how good the French was; how interesting it was to read; how imaginative/creative it was (the meaning of the latter was checked - colourful, pictures, lay-out, art and design skills). The partners in Nottingham would judge the outcomes considering these factors.
- The brochure on their home town had a real purpose: a description of their home town, what they thought was good, what could be improved. Links were made with the geography project that pupils completed on their home town.
- Next topic: *Le monde à toi*. Project about the pupils' immediate world, the environment, environmental concerns and comparisons with Orange. The project had an audience: the people from Orange.
- Pupils chose suggestions from a box for possible outcomes, for example, paper windows like an advent calendar, a pop-up book, a cassette recording, snakes and ladders, a set of dice, spin-the-wheel, card game. They needed to

use creativity and imagination and think about how they would use the idea, or devise another themselves. The pupils were told they would receive a grade at the end and were given bullet points as guides: Clear, attractive display item To go with the display, a passage in French Include places in town and adjectives to describe how the town could be improved Comparison between two parts of their home town or their home town and Provence Imagination and creativity Diary each week of what had been done Folder to keep work.

Project plan

Time lines and grids were devised to help pupils (and staff) to plan and conduct the project, to organise their schedule and to make expectations clear to pupils. At the project-setting stage, pupils in two classes were given a grid to stick in their books. In a third class, pupils were to have a grid after half-term to give them experience in managing a project, with homework building on class work. The fourth class received a sheet to outline the project but no mention was made of a grid. In one case the teacher explained that the grid was to go in pupils' exercise books to remind them on a weekly basis of what to do each week and that the teacher would check. Pupils were warned that if they were not able to work independently they would not be allowed to work with partners for the final outcome. In one class the grid was explained at length. The grid included columns for dates, class and homework tasks. The homework column was left blank for pupils to fill in their own homework as it might differ between individuals. One column 'To what extent have I achieved this?' was to be filled in by the pupil and teacher. The class-work column detailing work for each lesson in French was explained, with comprehension checked for certain terms, for example '*les comparaisons*', '*les opinions*'.

Questions

Pupils were invited to ask questions about the project and homework in all classes but few questions were asked.

Initial reactions

In one class, pupils' initial reactions to the project were sought:

'It's more interesting because there's more stuff to do and we don't have to do sheets, it's one big project'.

'It will be hard, longer, more interesting'.

'I'm excited about the project because it's different from what we normally do'.

They liked the idea of the pen-pal link with Nottingham:

'It's good to know that someone's going to write back'.

The teacher impressed on the pupils that they needed to think of the pen-pals as an audience, that the outcome was for them and not for the teacher.

Pupils' perceptions of the project

Pupils' perceptions of the project afterwards were captured in a questionnaire (Appendix 2) and in discussions on video.

Pupils' perceptions of the project: questionnaire

Pupils' perceptions were strikingly positive. Seventy-four percent of pupils were pleased with the final outcome of their homework during the half-term in which the project was conducted. Fifteen percent liked the look of the final result, 11% put a lot of effort in and a further 11% said they had learnt lots of French. Fifteen percent were not so pleased with the final outcome; 6% did not finish it. Eighty-five percent said their class work in French helped with the homework, the main reasons being help with different words/vocabulary and sentences/phrases. Eighty-two percent thought the homework helped with learning and making progress in French, 28% claimed it helped them use new language.

Pupils were asked what they liked about the homework tasks. The item mentioned most was doing the leaflet/project (17%). The next most popular items contrasted sharply: researching (e.g. on the Internet) (12%) and nothing (12%). Aspects of the homework tasks that were disliked were writing in French (14%), which was sometimes complicated/hard (11%) and boring (11%). Researching (on computers) was considered the easy part of the homework tasks by 25% of pupils and making the leaflet/project by 14%, while 19% found writing French more difficult and 12% found it 'hard to find what you want'. Many students responded well to a more independent style of learning: 52% would not have liked other support from their teacher, while 29% would have liked further support. The homework plan was not as popular with pupils as teachers might have thought: 22% thought it pointless as they wrote it in their planner too; 15% thought it was 'OK' and only 9% thought it helpful/useful.

Only 12% said they had learnt nothing about the way they learned and did homework while the remainder all had something positive to say about what they had learned. However, responses were very individual and the only one with multiple responses was 'fun tasks help me remember phrases' (14%). Only 17% said they would not have done anything differently if they were set this homework again. Once more, there was a range of individual answers, but the most frequent responses were 'spend more time on it' (14%), 'no grid' (12%), 'presentation' (12%) and 'have more time' (11%). Forty percent thought they could use what they had learnt in this homework in other subjects or other homework through, for example, research skills (8%) and organisation (6%).

One of the aims of this project was to discover ways of achieving more effective homework outcomes. Fifty-five percent of the pupils said they would want to do this type of homework again and 29% enjoyed it. However, there was still a significant number (26%) who would not want to do it again; some found it boring (6%) or too hard (5%).

Fifty-eight percent thought this homework had been different from French homework they had done before: it was 'not just writing' (11%), they had more time (8%), there was more research (6%) and it was more fun (6%). The advice they would give their teachers if this type of homework were to be done again with Year 9 would be to

extend the time available (22%), to give websites/references (9%) and give more help (9%).

Interviews with pupils

Interviews with small groups of pupils were arranged towards the end of the project. There was no schedule of questions; pupils were simply asked what they thought about the project. Generally pupils were positive and compared the project more favourably to their usual homework:

'It's been really interesting'.

'It's a good project because you learn a lot'.

'It's better doing the project than little bits of homework because you can find out more words and the teacher helps with new words'.

'You can go home and write at your own pace and be more creative with your ideas'.

'You get to do it whenever you want, you can do what you want'.

'I've enjoyed making it instead of doing it in my exercise book'.

They especially appreciated certain ways of working, doing research, using ICT, working with a partner:

'It's different; normally we just do sheets and can't be bothered to do it, but working with a partner and on the computer it's more interesting'.

'It's been better than normal because we had to research on computer'.

'We've been using computers to research instead of keep looking through books, 'cos that's boring, and we've been working with partners'.

'It's been good working in pairs, 'cos if you get stuck you can ask your friend, it's good to combine ideas'.

'It's gone really quickly that six weeks. I thought it was going to be boring. At first I thought 'Oh, no! What are we going to do? But then we did IT'.

They particularly enjoyed having a sense of purpose because of having an audience for their work other than the teacher:

'My favourite homework is doing pen-pal letters: in lessons we learn different things and we write to pen-pals and they write back'.

'The best bit is getting to read pen-pal's work'.

They enjoyed learning content through language:

'You can go to the Art Gallery and Museum and find out something new about the town: you find out new things while you're learning the language'.

'It's boring in Year 7 and 8 'cos it's always 'finish off' ... , but this time every step you take you learn something new'.

Future preparation for course work was mentioned as an advantage:

'Next year we'll be doing that. It'll help us get used to course work'.

For one pupil it even influenced her decision to opt for French in Year 10:

'By doing the project it's made me decide to do French. I wasn't too sure before'.

Staff experience and comments

Staff comments at the start of the project

Staff comments at the start of the project highlighted a range of positive and negative views. Teachers appreciated the feeling of ownership provided by the project so that they could have a slightly different slant on it and they felt pupils found it encouraging to know the project was long-term. Teachers thought that this long-term element made pupils realise the potential and value of what extra they could add and how they could put things right over time. In addition, one teacher commented that because the homework was longer-term it did not have such impact if pupils were away because they had to do it anyway, they could catch up and still have an end-product. Teachers thought that pupils appreciated the link with homework and what happens in lessons. They felt that the key to the success of the project was the fact that the work was real and had a sense of purpose in that the end-product would be sent off to a pen-friend in Orange/Nottingham/Provence. Teachers viewed certain aspects as motivational for some, for example, the research in the library, the use of ICT or bringing work to a lesson. Pupils were keen to work independently ('I don't want to work with X, she won't pull her weight and my levels will be down').

On the negative side, teachers found it took time to settle into what would make an appropriate bite-sized task that would lead into something else. There was some tension between giving a 'prescriptive suggestion' for homework and expecting pupils to make what they wanted of it. One teacher felt she had given pupils less freedom as she needed to give more directed homework because the first homework was not achieved. In some cases it took a few sessions to get going and there was a need for individual monitoring and checking; comparing with other pupils' work helped. Indeed, initially some had done very little. The grid proved a useful means of plotting tasks and pupils were encouraged to ask themselves 'what can I show to prove that I have completed this task?' In contrast, some pupils had almost finished the tasks and therefore had to be given new phrases before they had been presented and practised with the whole class. While the grid provided a schedule for the lessons and homework, some teachers found this very restrictive as they were not able to be flexible and depart from it in order to explain new structures. One teacher felt the schedule limited her to reading and writing and she would have preferred to do more speaking and listening. In some instances there were problems with the research: some pupils found material which was too complex and did not know what to do with it. One teacher was concerned that the outcome would not look like six weeks' work.

Staff comments at the end of the project

Teachers' reflections at the end of the project were generally positive. Although pupils had started off quite slowly (in one class only one had completed the research homework at the start), by the end their involvement had increased. They enjoyed working towards a goal, rather than using random, 'been and done and gone' homework. The project was a bit more open-ended and loose, and there was a real incentive in the end-product, which increased motivation. The teachers felt some unlikely pupils went straight into the research feet-first and found this very motivating. There were mixed feelings about the grid. Some pupils were able to catch up with things when they had been absent, but for those wanting to forge ahead, the language proved difficult as they needed the input first. Some pupils liked making and using the homework grid but they did not like the questionnaires as they felt they were duplicating work. Several of the teachers felt the lower-attaining pupils got the most out of the project. The reasons for their motivation were a real end-product, the fact they had been consulted beforehand, the continuity and the fact that they had been 'chosen' by the local university. The letter to pen-pals was very successful. In one class the letters were sent off to a school in Nottingham to be judged by their peers - a real audience - and the class was keen to visit Nottingham. One teacher said it had made her think about how to approach her Year 7 German homework by giving pupils a choice. Teachers thought there was future potential for similar longer-term homework projects maybe once or twice a year.

Conclusions and recommendations

An important aspect of this research project was the way in which it responded to pupils' views on homework. It thus contributed to the theme of pupil voice and the idea that pupils feel more positive about themselves as learners when their views are taken seriously (see, for example, MacBeath et al. (2003) and Rudduck and Flutter (2004)). It was clear from the initial research on baseline attitudes that the types of homework tasks pupils liked would involve creativity, research, using ICT and more extended project-style work. As a result, the special six-week project was devised to include these aspects. Pupils were very positive in their response to the homework as evidenced in the findings presented earlier, both regarding those elements which met their preferences expressed in the questionnaire and in the fact that they enjoyed collaborative work with a partner and that their work had a special audience other than the teacher. This provides a springboard on which to base further projects in the future in order to increase the effectiveness of modern foreign languages homework.

Appendix 1. Pupil questionnaire

- When do you do your French homework?
- Where do you do your French homework?
- Which type of homework tasks do you prefer most? (from all subjects)
- Why do you prefer these tasks?
- Which type of French homework tasks do you prefer most?
- Why do you prefer these tasks?
- If you had to set your own French homework what tasks would you ideally set yourself?
- Is French homework important? Why/why not?

Appendix 2. Pupil questionnaire

- What activities have you been working on in your homework in French over the last half term? Please write down anything you remember.
- Are you pleased with the final outcome of your homework during this half term? Why/why not?
- Did your class work in French help you with the homework? How?
- Do you think your homework helped you with learning and making progress in French? (Please circle) Yes No
- If yes, can you describe how the homework helped you make progress?
- If no, can you describe how the homework did not help you make progress?
- What did you like about the homework tasks?
- What did you dislike about the homework tasks?
- What did you find easy about the homework tasks?
- What did you find more difficult about the homework tasks?
- Would you have liked other support from your teacher?
- What did you think about the homework plan you were given?
- What have you learnt about the way you learn and do homework?
- Would you have done anything differently if you were set this homework again? What and why?
- Do you think you can use what you have learnt in this homework in other subjects or other homework? How?
- Would you want to do this type of homework again? Yes/No
- Why/why not?
- Do you think this homework has been different from French homework you have had before? Can you describe the differences, if you think there are any?
- If this type of homework is done again with Year 9 next year, what advice would you give your teachers?

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